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Interview with Russell Banks and Chase Twichell

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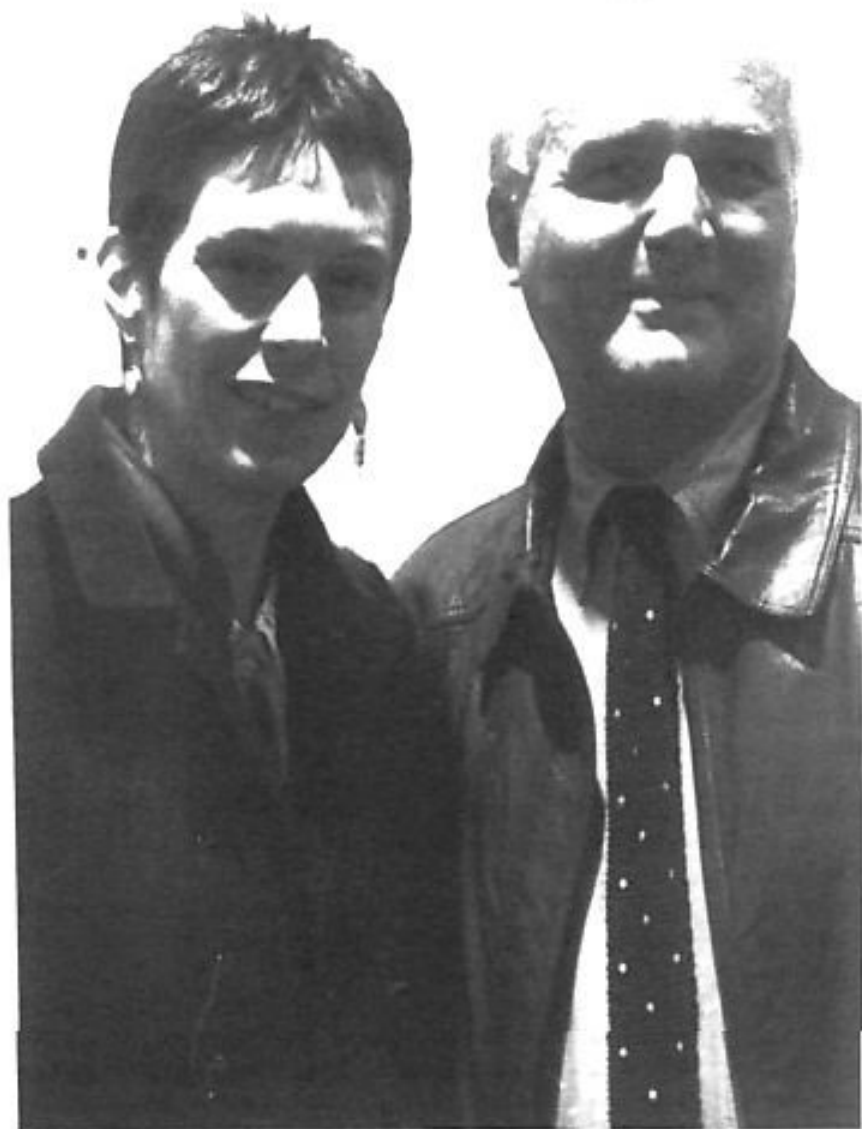
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Russell Banks and Chase Twichell appeared on the Iowa State University campus to meet with students and to give readings. Banks, a fiction writer, has received numerous awards including a National Endowment for the Arts grant and a Guggenheim fellowship. His stories have appeared in the Best American Short Stories and O. Henry Prize Stories anthologies and his latest novel, *Affliction*, has received great praise. Twichell, a poet, has also received a National Endowment for the Arts grant and numerous other awards. Her work has appeared in prestigious magazines such as *Antaeus* and in anthologies such as the *Moscow Anthology of Younger American Poets*. Her collections of poetry include *The Odds*, published by the University of Pittsburg Press.

Roberta Baumann, Mary Cantrell, and Anna Leahy
—transcription by Melissa Biederman

Interview with Russell Banks and Chase Twichell

First, we'd like to know who you write to, who you think your audience is.

Twichell: It's probably a different answer for each of us, so I'll answer and then Russell can answer. My audience is probably, well, is obviously people who read poetry. Who that is, is poets, students and those eccentric individuals out there who, for whatever reasons, read poetry. It's not the people who watch a lot of TV, it's not the people who spend their evenings in the mall...It's a question that I can only answer in retrospect because the perspective that I have on my own work changes quite drastically from the time I'm working on it to the time I can look back on it five years later. It's hard to make an appraisal of who's on your beam at any given moment. So it's something that I don't really worry about while I'm working; it's between me and language, and then later, whoever reads it is sort of almost beside the point.

Banks: Actually, for me, it's two questions, (I mean) I have to divide it into two questions in order to answer it. And, the first question is, who do you write for, and the second question is, who do you think your audience is. The answer to the second question in a way implies the answer to the first, for me, because I discover my audience after the fact, in retrospect, after the book is out, or story is published, and I'm out here, you know, doing readings, or whatever, or reading reviews...then I begin to find out who's actually reading me, and reading me sensitively, let's say, and that turns out to be different people and to change over the years. It also turns out to be not necessarily just Americans, and it might be also British or French or translation, things like that, so that's an evolving and changing thing, and it's a discovery after the fact, audience is.

But who I write for is different, because I think, like most writers, I write for an invented reader that's a composite of dead writers, and family members, and spouse, and friends, and so forth, kind of an invented, ghostly figure, that looks over your shoulder while you're working, ... And that's really different from what we mean normally by audience, because that's an act of the imagination entirely, and that has to do with the process of composition, really. It's almost like a ghost that you work with. Is it like that for you?

Twichell: Yes, it is.

Along those same lines, as you're writing, do you have a sense of responsibility toward your audiences to change their perceptions?

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Banks: That's a complicated question, too. I know both of these questions get asked often, and asked as if they were simple and one wishes they were easy to answer. I think that one's tricky and difficult. I think—again, I'm just going to speak for myself; we haven't talked about these subjects in quite these ways with each other. As just a man in the world, I would like my work to have some social use, whatever my work was. If I were a physician, a lawyer, or an architect, I would want it to have some social use, some positive social use. And, it's very hard for me not to have that value, that ethic attached to my life as a writer. So, I want that to be true. On the other hand, as a writer, I don't set out to change the world and so forth. I think that writing, that books can do that, and would do that. I hope my books do that. But, I believe that in order for them to do that you can't set out to make a book do that. You end up writing propaganda. And so I kind of have to split myself again in the two ways I'd split consideration of a readership. There's the me who sits down and writes the books, and there's the me who has a kind of social identity and reality and observes myself as a man in a profession that involves other people. Does that corroborate?

Twichell: Yes, it makes a lot of sense. I'm struggling with the notion of politics and poetry right now—what their relationship is to one another. On the one hand, it seems to me that if you want to change the world, one of the least useful things you can do is write a poem. It's like preaching to the saved, in a way. But on the other hand, I think that poems *do* change the world. They subtly push the rudder one degree so that the ship begins to turn. I think that art in general does that. And so, all I can do as a writer, and as a poet, is to be faithful to my own passions and politics and hope that they are explicated and propagated in my poems.

I've heard that you're concerned with a lot of environmental issues.

Twichell: That's true. My world view is contaminated by environmental issues. My world view is contaminated by my fear and anxiety and frustration about how poorly we treat our planet, and what it's likely to do in retaliation somewhere down the line. It's inescapable; it's in everything I see; it's in everything I think. Every time I pick up an apple to bite it, it's in the alar. I think it's inescapable in my work. It must surely show, and it will probably show more and more as time goes by.

[To Banks] I have a question for you. It's interesting that in part of the imaginative audience, or the people that you're writing to, you mentioned that there was a group of dead writers, and I'm kind of curious as to who those dead writers might be.

Banks: For me personally? Well, probably the ghost of Nathaniel Hawthorne; he probably lurks.

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Twichell: He loves your work.

Banks: And, the ghost of a very personal one, Nelson Algren, still lurks over my shoulder, in a way. He was a man I knew in my twenties and early thirties, and he was very important to me, just as a figure, as a man, as someone who showed what you have to do in America, inventing what it *was* to be a writer for himself. He helped me to invent myself as a writer, in ways that Hawthorne hasn't. I mean, he's more immediate and closer to my time and environment, too. And then there are a lot of other mostly American writers, Sherwood Anderson, Stephen Crane. There's a tradition of American writing in the late nineteenth, early twentieth century, that I feel strongly connected to. So, I wouldn't want to call them social realists because that reduces it too much and it's hard to put writers like Algren, who is very expressive and lyrical, side by side with writers like Stephen Crane, say, Sinclair Lewis, or even Sherwood Anderson. But, I feel most allied with them than I do with, say, the high modernists. And, more comfortable with them as writers, than as spirits—really, “spirits” is a better word than “ghosts” because it sounds like they haunt me, you know, as much as they inspire and guide, I think.

What about contemporary writers?

Banks: Well, I like and admire the work of a lot of contemporary fiction writers, not to mention a lot of contemporary American poets. But I feel a particular sense of kinship with my own generation of fiction writers. I think it's a very exciting time to be an American fiction writer in your forties [laugh]—it seems like there's a lot of them, good ones, too. And I can think of, oh, Robert Stone, or Don DeLillo or John Edgar Wideman or Margaret Atwood, although she's Canadian and will probably resent like hell my including her in a list of Americans. I still think of writers like *that* as having something very powerful to say, and saying it very powerfully, and as being rather clearly different from the generation of writers which precedes us, the generation of John Barth, William S. Burroughs, Robert Coover, and John Hocks, among the non-realists, and others like Updike, Mailer, Roth and so forth, among the realists. And so I feel—and Richard Ford, I didn't name him, or Raymond Carver, of course, he gets on every list. Those are really wonderful writers, and the work they're doing, I think, is invigorating, invigorating on American Literature, and, I think, invigorating what it means to read, in many ways. Every time a new generation of writers appears, in a sense, what they do is reinvent the process of reading. They teach us over again how to read and what to pay attention to in the act of reading. And, I think that these writers that I'm listing, in a way, are very different from, say, those in the modernist, strict modernist tradition who read differently. I think that what goes on in the kind of inter-generational transfer actually is a transfer not of literature, in literature, but in reading; reading keeps getting changed.

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Twicheil: Well, the marketing of reading is changing dramatically.

Banks: There's a lot of books that cross over the artistic and commercial boundaries.

Twicheil: They're no longer in clear, separated categories.

Banks: Also we're reading short stories today very differently from the way we read them twenty-five years ago because of the work of people like Ray Carver and Richard Ford. And so, we take them seriously. They're not diminutive forms, as they were, like a diminished novel. They actually are significant works of art in their own right and the genre has a dignity to it that we haven't really allowed it before that. You know, a book of short stories by a major writer would be considered a kind of throwaway, something that he did casually, not something that is the center of the work.

Do you feel the commercial and non-commercial overlap in poetry as well?

Twicheil: I don't think there is any commercial poetry, really. I mean Jimmy Stewart just published a book of poems, but it's doggerel. You know, it's junk. It's a greeting card. And, it's amusing that people like it. Who is it, that writer that the other day was reading a doggerel — oh, what's her name — Judith Viorst.

Banks: Yes.

Twicheil: Judith Viorst is a poet that sells a lot of copies. But she's not doing serious work, she'd doing funny stuff. Her latest book is about turning fifty and what life is like as a female at fifty. And it's just cutesy little rhymes. It's not the same enterprise at all.

Who do you admire in contemporary poetry?

Twicheil: Well, let me tell you who some past loves were first because that might be enlightening. I guess Homer was my first love because my father was a classicist and read *The Odyssey* to me when I was a kid. So it got into my ear. And I loved Keats and Yeats, so I came up through the centuries reading without much logic to the patterns. I mean, the patterns that my reading took did not have much logic to them. And I still read eccentrically in that I'll get interested in someone and read them for a while, and that will lead to someone else and that will lead to someone else. Among contemporary poets, I admire C.K. Williams and Bob Hass, Stephen Dobbins, some of Louise Glick's work, especially the earlier books. Jory Graham is writing interesting poems now, I think. There are lots of people; I could name fifty of them. It seems to me true that as one ages and

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continues to write, for whatever reasons, a lot of people drop out of the race. And so, I'm about forty, the number of people who are roughly my age who are writing are legion. There's zillions of people. In ten years, some of those will have disappeared. In twenty years a lot more of them will have disappeared. And this is true of the years behind me, as well. It's almost like a pyramid: it gets narrower at the top. And I always wonder about the people who wrote terrific books and then disappeared. What happened to them?

I'd like to know something about how you feel as writing teachers, how you see yourself, and how effective you think teaching actually is.

Twichell: These are good questions you're asking. They're fun to answer. [To Banks] Go, on that one.

Banks: Well, let's see. I think probably like most fiction writers of my generation, or fiction writers of the last twenty years or so, I entered teaching for strictly financial reasons. It was one of the ways I could make a living and could organize and control my own time, the only way I could imagine, actually.

And then I continued to do it probably because I got fairly good at it. I was allowed to continue to do it. But also, because I learned to understand and like it and began to feel it was relatively useful. It wasn't a cynical operation for me. And now I continue to do it without really any financial motivation because I feel I could live without it for lots of reasons.

Not because I think I'm making writers. I teach an undergraduate program and happen to like teaching undergraduates better than teaching graduates. I think I'm able to educate readers of contemporary fiction and poetry directly at a time when they're either going to turn off or turn on to contemporary fiction and poetry. And also, I'm dealing with people who for the most part have been miseducated in their secondary school education. I have a kind of sense of myself as the missionary, and there is a conversion impulse to it. Also, I just happen to like kids between the age of about eighteen and twenty-two. They're interesting, and they're funny to me. I think they're much funnier than graduate students and so they're more pleasant to hang around with and to work with, generally speaking. Maybe because I have kids of my own that age. When my kids pass on that year I may not be so interested in them.

But also, I've been thinking about it lately because I've been reevaluating my relation to teaching and my teaching career as a whole and I think probably it's good for me. I was talking to Jane Smiley last night about it. The prospect of teaching one semester—say, three months a year and then writing steadily for eight months or nine months a year—is a nice rhythm, because writing is such a

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solitary and self-absorbed activity that it doesn't hurt to come blinking out of the cave into the sunlight every now and then and *have* to talk to people and *have* to relate to real people, not just these phantasms that you're living with the rest of the year. So, I probably will want to continue teaching and dealing with people in that capacity some way or other as long as I can.

Twichell: I think, as far as poetry goes, you can't really teach someone to write the real stuff unless they were going to write it anyway, and then all you can do is help them organize the explorations that they need to do to get there..

Banks: You're an enabler.

Twichell: Yes, that's what I feel like. That's a good word for it. But I can tell them what they need to read; I can speed up the process for them. I can steer them to things they should read. I can help them with the mechanics, the real nuts and bolts stuff, make sure that they have a background that makes them feel confident about metrics and the various rhythmical systems that poetry uses. And, I can help them catch their mistakes sooner than they might otherwise, although I really believe that anyone who is seriously working is going to figure it out by themselves sooner or later. I mean, Lord knows there have been plenty of poets who have learned how to write poetry over the centuries without teachers. And each poet really has to invent the work that they're going to do; there's no one else who can tell them or help them figure out what their obsessions are, and what form that will take on paper. So, in a way, I'm kind of useless. But, on the other hand, I can speed it up.

How useful do you find your experience as teachers in terms of your own writing?

Twichell: It's useful in a limited way. It helps me clarify whatever it is I'm pondering at the moment. I try to bring to class whatever it is I'm particularly interested in at the moment so that that excitement can be contagious. Because I don't think it really matters where you enter the inquiry so long as you can get a foothold as a student and think, "Hey, you know, maybe I could be good at this," or "I get it."

I can encourage people. I know I can teach people to be good readers, and I can teach people to write better than they did before. But, if you take a student, no matter how well intentioned, and how smart, if they don't have that special ear for language, there's no way you can give it to them, at least that I've discovered. And probably the best that they'll be able to do is to write competent, intelligent, lucid poems, without making any mistakes, but that doesn't mean they're also going to have whatever that "flukey" quality is that makes somebody just jump off the page at you, utterly distinct and maverick which is what I always look for.

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Banks: Also, interesting, I think a useful analogy—teaching writing compared to teaching say, music at a certain level. A person learns to play the piano well enough but realizes that they will never be a concert pianist. But still as a result of that experience of that training, is going to be a marvelous listener, be a great member of the audience.

Twichell: Or maybe a great music teacher.

Banks: Yes, or a great teacher. Or even a critic, and so forth. And I think that that's a kind of necessary and good by-product of the workshop—writing workshop method—and the institutions of MFA's and graduate and undergraduate writing programs around the country. I really am delighted that so many graduates now of MFA programs are, instead of just going automatically into teaching, are going into other professions like editing, arts administration, because, there aren't that many teaching jobs anymore. And so, they're going off into slightly related but not necessarily directly related fields like teaching - like Screenwriting: it's good to have a bunch of literate screenwriters to support us.

Twichell: It sure is.

Banks: I'm glad that those guys are going out to Hollywood and reading synopses, writing synopses for Universal Studios, and whatever with their MFA's. I think that's a terrific development for all of us who write the book.

This is kind of a stock question, but do you have any stock advice that you would give writers or to people just starting to write?

Twichell: Read.

Banks: It may be a stock question, but there isn't a stock answer to it.

Twichell: The easiest stock answer is reading.

Banks: Yes—reading.

Twichell: You can never read too much.

Banks: Yes, yes. I have a couple of friends—they aren't really young—but they're in their twenties and a couple of people also also in their thirties who are kind of edging tentatively up to that line where they have to really try it or not try it, where it goes from being a hobby or a kind of pastime to being something where their ego and their sense of their self is at risk. I do advise them to go ahead and plunge into it. To mark out of their life a few years and sacrifice those few years

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to that and test that fantasy. Go ahead, you know. If it means quitting your job and setting it up working nights or some other kind of economic arrangement so that you can do it, it's worth doing it. If it means going to college, back to school or whatever, or going to some graduate program or something like that, whatever it means, sit down and do it because if you don't do it, you're going to end up in your forties and fifties and on with a kind of mystery about your life, an unlived portion of your life.

Twichell: Yes—could I have done it?

Banks: Yes. It'll cause you grief. And you'll never really quite be able to justify that—not having done it later on. It doesn't really finally matter in the ultimate scheme of things whether you become a writer or not but it really matters whether you test that fantasy.

My own daughter, in fact, is one of the people that I've advised to go ahead and do it, pay the price for a couple of years. And then, a friend of mine who's my lawyer, as a matter of fact [laughs], who wants to do it. I said, "Well, go ahead and do it— you *should* do it. You're going to sit around here, you're going to spend the next 25 years feeling this is vaguely guilty, and vaguely deprived, and as a result, angry.

Twichell: Yes, mad at yourself.

Banks: Yes. So, I guess that's a kind of generic advice but it's advice I know, I'd take seriously. Once you cross that line and then you are obsessed. In a way you don't need much advice because the obsession provides its own momentum and its own energy. And then you need more technical advice, perhaps some more specific advice, but the general kind of advice is go ahead and test the engines, see if it works.

We're also wondering if you experimented with other genres. Have you [Twichell] also written fiction and have you [Banks] ever written poetry?

Twichell: I wrote a few stories which I hope no one ever finds when I was in graduate school.

I just don't think that way. My world is not linear. The logic of fiction, or part of the logic of fiction, it seems to me, is that things chain react. Something happens which causes something else, etc. And, like one of my teachers once said to me, "Why do you always start in the middle of one story and end in the middle of the next?" And I thought, "Well, that's the way it seems to me, that's the way the world seems." And so, I think I was doomed to failure as a fiction writer. I

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think sideways, laterally, or out from a central point in spokes or something, but it ain't stuff that good fiction is made of.

Banks: Well, let's see. Well, I confess I have committed poetry. And in my twenties I took myself very seriously as a poet, and even published some and—

Twichell: Several books, in fact.

Banks: Yes, which in fact, frankly disappeared for the most part. But, I don't write it now, although I threaten to every now and then, and would like to. And, of course, I read it with great energy and enthusiasm.

Twichell: And I read fiction like crazy. I love to read fiction that thing I cannot do.

Banks: I would like to be able to write something like poetry. Something like what is called poetry, which is I guess a way of saying, I'd like to be able to write something other than fiction. Where, I think there's a whole side of my emotional life that I cannot figure out how to tap or how to express in fiction. And, I know there's something I want to say, I guess, to the left of fiction, that's close to poetry, that would tap it. But I haven't been able to imagine a form or a voice for it yet. I would like to be able to do that, and expect I will. I don't have simply a kind of intellectual curiosity about writing poetry. I have this emotional need and, maybe I'll be able to find some form that I can use to articulate it.

Is that, then - the emotional context - what defines the differences you see between fiction and poetry?

Banks: No, it's just a range of emotion. I mean, if you think of my emotional range as on a scale from red to blue or something like that, probably I can manage to get my emotional range from somewhere over here in the yellow area, to the blue all right in fiction. But there still remains this other area of my own emotional life that I can't get into fiction. I think probably fiction writers tend to cover that. Poets tend to have that other end of the scale covered with a big, overlapping area in the middle. But, I don't know that it's an essential difference between the two in terms of the difference between the emotions. It's really personal and, and as you can see, incoherent.

Do you think then, that reading the genre that you're not writing still influences what you're writing?

Banks: Oh, it definitely does for me, yes. When I was first becoming a writer, in my early twenties and middle twenties, and on, even into today, my closest

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males friends were all poets—William Matthews and Charles Simmick, Charlie Williams, Jim Tate—a whole bunch of poets. And we were all buddies coming up together. How they viewed writing, and their relation to language, and I think, too, their sense of themselves just as people who were trying to build an adult life, as young men trying to become grown up men, had a lot to do with how I evolved myself, and how I think of my enterprise today. I, I'm very conscious of, I think I'm probably more conscious of my relation to language and, and my sense of the activity as having a personal, moral base, of one being at risk in the act of writing, that derives from poets of that generation more than from fiction writers. Sometimes I don't know what fiction writers—my contemporaries, and peers—are talking about, but feel very comfortable with the poets.

I think Ray Carver was like that, too. In the sense of enterprise, his sense of the enterprise. It was locked in his having written poetry for so many years, and, and his close relationship to poets. That there was a kind of personal risk, every time you sat down to write a sentence. That your character was at stake in some way.

Are you working on projects right now?

Twichell: I just finished a book last week. So, I'm on vacation.

Banks: She's still catching her breath. Her heartbeat hasn't come back to normal yet.

Twichell: And I have a project, a textbook that I'm going to be working on for a few months, and then I guess I'll get on to the next book of poems.

Banks: I started a novel this summer and then abandoned—I didn't abandon it, I, although it probably seems abandoned—left it for the publication of this book *Affliction* came out. The book came out in September and there was a lot of publicity, and touring, and one thing and the other associated with it.

Twichell: We're talking about two trips a week for two months.

Banks: So I just parked the manuscript and left it, hoping that it's at a kind of, its reached a kind of—

Twichell: It's cryogenically frozen.

Banks: I hope that it's cryogenic, that I can kind of thaw it out and it will come back to life. I've not tried this before, leaving something like that. But, it may actually turn out, I'm beginning to think maybe I'm just rationalizing that this little hiatus is a good thing, that it's giving me a chance to kind of rethink the book,

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and come back to it with some kind of understanding that I didn't have at the time.

Do you find that that's part of your process? I find that I'll put things aside and they kind of mushroom in my mind.

Twichell: Yes.

Banks: You do that more than I do. I don't do that so much.

Twichell: When I'm working on a poem, even if I'm not anywhere near my desk, something's cooking in there all the time. I'm very aware of that I take little notes. Things come to me a wierd times of day, or in the middle of the movie when it's really inconvenient to write it down.

Do you keep a journal?

Twichell: I used to keep a journal. I think I have twenty something volumes of it that I've kept of it over the years. Then it degenerated into a kind of record of emotional life which was not interesting to read later. Or maybe I just didn't need it anymore. But I quit doing it. Every once in a while I'll write something, but I'm out of the habit.

Banks: You keep notebooks, though. You carry a notebook and track things very carefully.

Twichell: But those are notes that go immediately into rough drafts, and notes themselves get lost. They're not coherent in and of themselves. I don't even understand them myself if I wait. I let a week or two go by and then look at them: "What did I mean by that?"

Banks: I tend to work on a more regular, and, which is again a, probably a difference between prose writer and poet, too—on a regular, day to day basis. And so when I start something, I tend to just go back to it every day and put another brick in place and—one hopes that they're bricks, and not straw, but—

Twichell: I do that, too. Once I'm in a poem, I can work on it obsessively until it's done, but between poems, can't-I can't force it, I can't will it. If the next one's not ready to be picked, I can't get it.

What do you see as your most successful work? I mean, not necessarily most popular, but the work that you felt that you succeeded the most at?

Twichell: I guess most writers would probably, answer that question by naming

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whatever the most recent thing was they did. Just out of the sheer hope that it was, in fact, the best work. In fact, I think the book I just finished is my best work, so far. If it isn't, I'm in trouble [laugh].

Banks: There is always that. If it isn't the best one, you know, that, what does that mean? And is this the beginning of the end? Is this how it feels to be over the hill?

Twichell: But there are horror stories about writers who start off with a brilliant book and can never again write one up to that level.

Banks: Yes, I know.

Twichell: That would be terrible.

Banks: That's a great source of dread. I suppose I feel the same way: that the last book is the best book. But you do have favorites that haven't got anything to do with quality.

Twichell: Don't your favorites change, though?

Banks: I guess so. I still have a special feeling for *The Relation of My Imprisonment*, which is a small book, in terms of length, and, in some ways I feel that it's more formally successful than anything else I ever did. It manages to accomplish what it set out to do most successfully, more so than in any of the other books. And, and yet get treated, by reviewers and critics and generally by readers in a slightly condescending manner, you know. And so I have a kind of protective feeling towards it, the way you do toward maybe a child with a very special gift and, who's condescended to, while others are out there you know, winning their letters in sports and things. There's this other special child you have.

Twichell: The one that likes to look at things under the microscope.

Banks: Yes, that one. And I feel that way about *The Relation of My Imprisonment*, which is perhaps a kind of defensiveness about it or something, but still and all, an affection for it.

Do you [Twichell] have a special child or favorite work?

Twichell: There are a few poems that I'm attached to for some personal reasons and they change. I'll find that my favorite poems one year are not necessarily the same as the next year. It's interesting to me. The ones that seem to endure on my list of favorites are the ones that are most mysterious to me now in that I can't

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remember how I wrote them. And I'm amazed when I go back, especially to the first book, and I read some of those poems, and I couldn't possibly write them now—I'm not the same person; I'm not the same mind; I'm not of the same sensibility. And so they have a life of their own, I suppose, to continue Russell's analogy about the child. The kid grew up and did things without me, and those interest me very much. And it's a strange sensation to no longer be able to do something that you once could do—or to no longer know something that you once knew. So that I can teach myself things that I have utterly and permanently forgotten by reading the old poems. It's a very wierd sensation. I feel like part of my brain is lost, and the relic of it, or the proof that it once existed is the poems.

This is the first interview with the two of you together.

Twichell: Yes, it's fun. It's easier to talk when there's somebody else you can bounce off of.

Since you're married, to each other and both writers, could I ask you, are there advantages, or disadvantages, or both, having a writer as a spouse when you're a writer yourself.

Twichell: Let's see who can answer it first. Nothing but advantages. It really is true. For one thing, you can act strangely in the way that writers are inclined to do, like long silences, where the other person may or may not talk and then you say, "What—what?" You come in from outer space. And the other person knows exactly what's going on and you don't have to explain it. You can also after dinner say, "Well, I guess I'm going to go to work," and the other person doesn't have hurt feelings, because they know that you're only going off to your desk. And it's not that you're bored with them, or that the conversation isn't going well, or whatever. Also, speaking now more personally, Banks is an incredible critic, and my best reader ever, which is really wonderful for me, a lucky thing, that I can show him poems when I finish them, and he usually manages to zero in on whatever it is that needs zeroing in on.

Banks: The thing is, a spouse can be wonderful reader or a terrible reader for you, because she or he knows by the tone of your voice when you're faking it, even when you yourself don't, or you can't admit it to yourself when you've taken the shortcut, or when you've been evasive or when you're vain, you're spouse knows it and point it to you, and, one hopes, in a gentle way, and in a way that you could never hear from anybody else, from, you know, a stranger, certainly, or even a friend. But you can in the privacy of your home listen to it and acknowledge it, and then change it. So that it is important. Let's see, a disadvantage might be, however, that when you're married to a writer, living with a writer, then you have twice as many books to pack and move.

Sketch

Twichell: Oh, that is bad one. How many—I've had, what—150 cartons of books.

Banks: Which is a nightmare. We had to do that. We've done it in the last couple years a couple times. And so, it's just been a nightmare and I really wished at those time that you weren't a writer.

Twichell: That I was a book burner instead.

Banks: Right. Just one of those people who only had, like two books. A Gideon Bible and a Dictionary or something. But that's, a pain in the neck. It helps in many ways. It's a little—I think, another disadvantage—I'm just thinking of disadvantages that you tend to duplicate social relations.

Twichell: That's true.

Banks: So that you don't bring strange people into your social life as easily.

Twichell: I think we've both managed to bring some strange people in.

Banks: Yes, well, they're strange people, but I mean, if you or I were a lawyer or a physician there'd be another kind of professional circle of people that would be in our life as a result.

Twichell: Yes, that could be broadening. On the other hand, it is so nice not to have to go through all those polite conversations with, I don't know—the lawyers, or whoever the spouse's friends are. It's really relaxing to be able just to swim in the same water all the time.

Banks: Yes, yes it is.

Do you think it would be different if you both wrote fiction or you both wrote poetry?

Twichell: I think that would be a lot harder.

Banks: I would, too.

Twichell: We're ten years apart, and so that puts us in definitely different generations, which helps. But being in a completely different genre is the best, I think.

Interview with Russell Banks and Chase Twichell

Banks: You don't measure yourself, you're not measured against, and you don't measure yourself against the other person in any way that it's a lot easier. Especially since in terms of career and in terms of, you know, your own success or lack of it—

Twichell: I don't think you can really talk about that situation generically, though because we know plenty of literary couples—

Banks: Yes.

Twichell: One in particular—I won't say who, it doesn't matter—but where the younger spouse is jealous and competitive and it causes a lot of problems, and you see that a lot, particularly when one spouse has a lot more attention, get more attention, and has more success than the other. It really then basically depends on the personal politics of the relationship and if you have a strong ego and can see the larger perspective, but that happens I'm sure in any, any kind of field.

Banks: That's true. But those occasions where one has to be large minded arise with less frequency when one is a novelist and the other's a poet. I know I have to be generous and dignified and so forth as often as I would if you were writing fiction and getting as much attention as we get.

Twichell: That's true. It's been very interesting for me, because of course I was a writer for a long time before I married Russell and I got to be the writer in the family. Whenever I was involved with someone they were never a writer, no one in my family is a writer, my parents, my siblings, etc. and so I got to be the big cheese in the writer category, but now I'm the little cheese [all laugh].

Maybe one's Mozzarella and the other's Swiss.

Banks: Exactly, exactly. Very good.

Twichell: It's fun, though. It's fun. I like it a lot.